

The Efficacy of Prayer Consider'd.

A
S E R M O N

Preach'd at the Parish-Church of

S C A R T H O,

In the County of

L I N C O L N,

On *Sunday*, July 9, 1704.

Upon his Leaving that Parish.

By *Edward Roberts*, M. A.
Rector of *Rayleigh* in *Essex*, and Member of
CONVOCATION.

L O N D O N,
Printed for *T. Bennet*, at the *Half-Moon* in *St. Paul's*
Church-Yard, 1704.



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St. MARK XI. 24.

Therefore I say unto you, What Things so-ever ye desire when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.

THE Duty prescrib'd by our Blessed Saviour is so reasonable in it self, and so advantagious to all pious and understanding Observers, that even such as wanted the Benefit of Divine Revelation ever practis'd it; whose Devotions have been intense and well-meaning, tho' unhappily plac'd in many large Nations upon wrong Objects: For they made Prayer, for their Goods, their Wives and Children, to that painted Idol which had no Life; for Help, they call'd upon the weak; for Life, humbly besought the dead; and for a good Journey, ask'd of that which was not able to set a Foot forward. This Dotage of Worship were perhaps scarce credible out of any Book but the Bible, which expressly testifies, that the Servants of *Baal* were engag'd in the Exercise of it, with great Warmth and Importunity, from Morning 'till Noon, as a fix'd, solid Undertaking.

But the *Jews*, having a surer Word of Prophecy, employ'd their Time after another Manner, and to a

much better Effect; for they presented their Petitions to that Supream Being, who had not only a compleat Knowledge of their Wants, but sufficient Goodness also to relieve them: So that Christ at His Coming did not alter their Worship, which was in it self excellently good, and directed always to the true God, but only regulate the Abuses of it, indeed, chiefly correct those notorious Abuses, which had unfortunately crept from the First into the Second Temple. And this was done by Him with unusual Severity in this Chapter; *For he overthrew the Tables of the Money-changers, and Seats of those that sold Doves.* Adding with an holy Violence, *ver. 17. Is it not written, My House shall be called of all Nations a House of Prayer? but ye have made it a Den of Thieves.* All His other Acts were the Issues of admirable Tenderness and Benignity, but in this His Sacred Mind was ruffled and discompos'd, and His Anger was evidently stirr'd up against the Defecration of His Father's Temple; where the best Worship, then extant in the World, was fatally corrupted by scandalous Irreverence, and many prophane Usages. However, to encourage His Followers to frequent it under that awful and tremendous Name, not as an Exchange, but as a House of Prayer, of daily Incense and Sacrifice; He was pleas'd graciously to improve the Observation of *Peter* concerning the fruitless Fig-Tree, condemned by him the Day before, and then dry'd up by the Roots, and actually wither'd away, into a Discourse of Divine Reliance, and plainly Argumentative of the Efficacy and Power of Faith. Upon which Act,

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His cursing the Fig-Tree, (there being no other of this kind to be met with in the History of His Life) many are the Remarks and Conjectures of Learned Interpreters, too many to be recited here; but the obvious Tendency of it was to influence the Disciples to walk in the Paths of Virtue and beneficial Piety, to make the Temple their Delight, and the Worshipping of His Father in it the great Employment of their Lives. And a stronger Motive to the Practice could not possibly be propos'd to their Minds, than that of our Blessed Lord propos'd in the Text :

Therefore I say unto you, the Words are Commanding and Authoritative, the very Form wherewith all His new and superadded Laws were enacted, What Things soever ye desire when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. Words, which forcibly strike all Mankind.

Past all peradventure, the sincere Lovers of God's House, and such as habitually frequent the Ordinances and Institutions of Christianity, may with solid Comfort peruse this Scripture, as the strongest Indication of the Wisdom of their daily Practice, and effectually proving One Day in His Courts better than a Thousand spent elsewhere. This is remarkably useful and subservient, to fix and establish a particular Conversation with Heaven, and the Things of it : And therefore I determin'd to End my Ministry in this Place with the Consideration of it, leaving it among you, as the most powerful Encouragement, the noblest Motive to Devotion, whether Publick or Private, which must draw

draw down Blessings from above upon your selves, your Families and Posterity. This is a standing written Persuasive of our common Lord and Master, That we signifie our Needs to the Father by Him in secret, but more especially, that we present our Joint-Suppliations in the Holy Assemblies of His People, where He is most glorify'd, and we most likely to prevail. The Apostles were All present in a Body when this Counsel was deliver'd, and continu'd at *Jerusalem* at least Twelve Years in the Publick Discharge of it; and consequently It must have a special Aspect on Us, as a Congregation, a form'd Society or Parish of Christians, and performing the Duty often together. In order then to come at its Genuin Meaning, and Full Consequence, that we may not build too much or too little upon this Passage, I will speak to Three Things as Heads of Discourse.

I. Shew, That this gracious Promise of our Lord is punctually made good in Things spiritual, and necessary to Salvation; so understood, the Words are literally true, *That what Things soever we desire when we pray, believing, we shall receive.*

II. Enquire, How far this Passage of the Gospel is a Truth, and as such to be depended on, when our Prayers are directed to God for Temporal Favours, the Things of this Life.

III. Assert, That the frequent Denial of our Temporal Wishes and Petitions is no Reflection on the Blessed Author of the Text, nor any the least Disparagement to his Doctrine, but a Method perfectly consistent

stent with God's Honour and Goodness, and highly beneficial to our selves.

The First of these Heads, That the Promise is made good in Things spiritual and necessary to Salvation, cannot be deny'd without being intolerably injurious to the Honour of our Maker; for to suppose His Bowels shut, or contracted in Necessaries, were to set Him some Degrees below even common Men: So melancholy a Supposition would chill our Affections in His House, and minister just Matter of Complaint to the most serious and devout Heart, as tho' we met still in vain, as so many Persons beating the Air, and shew Christianity to be a lank, disconsolate and unprofitable Service. Therefore, wisely to prevent all such Objections, and to conduct her Members with Chearfulness to the sacred Assemblies; our Church in the Exhortation, containing the Ends of our Meeting, declares this to be one, and is a Principal End of our Coming together, namely, *To ask Things requisite and necessary as well for the Body as the Soul.* And such as are requisite for the nobler Part of us, and the allowed Subjects of our Prayers, which will be as certainly obtain'd as ask'd, may summarily be reduc'd to Three.

First, A competent Knowledge of the Doctrine of Christianity, such as may serve to guide us in the way to Life. For, if practical Subjection to our Saviour's Kingdom of Grace be an indispensable Qualification for that of His Glory, there must be answerable Need of comprehending His Laws in a manner conducive to the promoting of the great Ends of His Kingdom, together with

with their proper Motives and Sanctions; *For this is Eternal Life, to know God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent*; whose Laws are chiefly revealed in order to be understood and practis'd. Now the Understanding of those things, wherein our present Duty and future Happiness are concern'd, is a common Attainment; these are levell'd to the Capacities of all sincere Enquirers, tho' they are neither Philosophers, Divines nor Disputants. There are confessedly abstruse difficult Points in Religion, some things hard to be understood, but the more hard always the less necessary: There are Mysteries *which the very Angels desire to look into*, but without Effect. But then the Knowledge of these is never the Condition of our Happiness, we may go to Heaven, tho' unable distinctly to explain how there should be Three distinct Persons in One Essence, and Two distinct Natures in One Person: How Virginity should Conceive, and a God be born: Eternal Life depends not upon our knowing whether there be Nine Orders of Angels, or how they act in Society: Whether the Soul of Man be immediately created or infused: Or how it operates now dwelling in the Body. Such Enquiries may exercise speculative polite Wits, who grasp at all Knowledge, and disdain to believe what they cannot comprehend; but cannot modestly be inserted into his Prayers, who owns, with *St. Paul*, that in this State of Imperfection, *We know but in part, and see but through a Glass darkly*. What ever then is essential to Christianity, all the Things pertaining to Life and Godliness, may deservedly be accounted the Subject of

of this Promise, humbly to be claim'd by our Faith, and by the Blessing of God upon our Prayers and Endeavours, actually compass'd by us. But our knowing things never so well cannot make us happy, unless we do them. And therefore,

Secondly, Another standing Requisite, and fit to be ask'd, is the sincere Practice of Virtue, or rather the whole Chain of Virtues, the entire Complex of Evangelical Graces, which is deny'd to none. For Goodness and Virtue are such evident Transcripts of the Divine Nature, that God cannot be pleas'd more highly, than in Communicating the same to his depending Creatures; *it being of his own free Will*, as St. Paul expresses it, *that we should be sanctify'd*; who bestows a Strength every way proportion'd to the Difficulty of his Precepts, even a Sufficiency of Grace to keep us in a safe, tho' not a sinless State. In this Respect, for Aids to live virtuously, our Petitions are often happily prevented, and such plentiful Showers of Divine Favour fall upon us insensibly, which we, alas! for Unworthiness dare not, and for Blindness cannot ask. And the stronger virtuous Habits and Acquisitions appear to be, the more ready always are the Owners in acknowledging the Infinite Goodness of the Giver, who are sensible that they are Masters of nothing which they have not receiv'd, and that their greater Graces are but so many pressing Arguments and Obligations to a greater Humility. Agreeable to which is the Observation of the Lord Bacon, the Noble and Learned *Verulam*, *That the Desire of Power was the Fall of Angels, the Desire of*

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Knowledge was the Fall of Man; but in Virtue there is no Excess, neither Men nor Angels have ever incurr'd any Danger by it.

Thirdly, There is requisite, our Desiring, as a divine and peculiar Gift, an unsway'd Constancy, a stedfast Continuance in the Paths of Virtue. And this is exceeding necessary, and ought to be our common Aim and Wish, inasmuch as Neglect or Instability may blast our fairest Hopes, when we are advanc'd to the desir'd Station of the Scribe in the Gospel, *and not far from the Kingdom of God*. One foul Relapse may destroy the costly Frame and Structure of our Virtue, and a single Hour pull down the Pious Improvements of a whole Life. And this fully evinces the Necessity of keeping close to our Duty, of frequenting Churches and Altars, and making daily Supplications to Him, *who is known in his Palaces as a sure Refuge*. Even mighty Peter, the leading Disciple in the Context, was miserable in the Hands of his own Counsels, and could not be restor'd to the forfeited Favour of his Lord without sincere and obstinate Tears. Absolute Safety, impregnable Defence, is no where found on this side Heaven; but still our greatest Safety lyes in this, in being devout, fix'd Dependants on Him that made us. The Doctrine press'd by some without Doors, That Assurance of Salvation is attainable, so as never to be lost, some Years before Death, evacuates the Force, or rather supercedes the Use of Prayer for Perseverance in Virtue. But that Doctrine is no where countenanc'd in Scripture, and the Practice of *St. Paul* is an open Confutation of it, who earnestly

earnestly pray'd for his beloved *Philippians*, *That their Love might abound more and more in Knowledge, and in all Judgment: That they might approve things that were excellent, and continue sincere, and without Offence, 'till the Day of Christ*, Phil. 1. 9, 10. And, indeed, the Security of the Apostles themselves consisted in their having a prevailing Intercessor, *One that pray'd that their Faith might not fail*. These things then that are of a spiritual Import, strictly necessary to enlighten the Understanding, refine the Temper, better the Life, and fit Christians for Immortality; God is always more ready to bestow than they are to ask: In this Particular our Desires are exactly answer'd and fulfill'd, if they are duly made and rightly qualify'd.

First, If they are presented with Faith, as that is an Act of Divine Reliance, oppos'd and contradistinguish'd to all Wavering and Criminal mixture of Doubting. This properly our Saviour points out in the Text, as the vital Power, the very Foundation of our common Dependance on the Father of Spirits; without which our Petitions must have a faint Accent, grow cool upon our Lips, and immediately perish in the Air; and with which we shall be able to overcome the most pressing Difficulties, to dismay all Opposition, and in a good Sense even to remove Mountains; so strong is the Operation of it, if we War worthily, even a certain Victory.

Secondly, Our spiritual Desires ought to be fram'd with a positive Assurance of their Agreeableness to the Divine Will, to that which is commonly call'd God's

Directive or Reveal'd Will, and can never be thought contrary to his Eternal Purpose : It being against the stated Forms of Justice, a flat Contradiction to common Sincerity, for Christ to interpose his Sovereign Authority in the Case, and to enjoin the Disciples to Pray in the Text, had he resolv'd to stop his Ears, decline his Mediatory Office, and not to hear them. According to the severe Hypothesis indeed, that some are fore-damn'd by mere Prerogative, our Prayers for the best Things must be dubiously express'd ; we cannot desire to be fitted for Heaven, but with this Proviso, that we are not already condemn'd to inherit another Place : Nor can we implore Grace, but with this express Condition, that it be seen by the Author necessary or expedient for us. And such Addresses would effectually turn our Churches into Scenes of Despair and Confusion, into so many uncomfortable Jails and Dungeons ; nay, upon that bottom, the Supplications of great Numbers among the Living, would bear a close Affinity and Resemblance to the Cries of the miserable in the Regions of Darkness. Rejecting therefore the Scheme of irrelative Decrees, as contrary to the Equity of the Divine Nature, and plainly inconsistent with the Ends of Christianity ; our Requests must be Peremptory and Unconditional, and when they are not granted we may rest assur'd, that not Want of Benignity in God, but somewhat that is amiss in our selves, is the undoubted Reason of the Failure : There being no Truth in the Fatal Principle, nor any possible Bar against us, excluding us from Favour, but what is form'd, and actually
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laid by our own wilful Demerit and Provocation. And with this Remark, so pregnant with Comfort, the First Point is finish'd and dismiss'd.

The *Second*, and next in the Order propos'd, is, To enquire how far this Passage is a Truth, and so to be depended on, when our Prayers are directed to God for Temporal Favours.

All the foremention'd Graces and Pious Qualifications are the Subject of an absolute Promise, because they are invariably good, and in their own Nature and Essence necessary unto Life. But since the highest Interests of this World may prove hurtful or inexpedient to the Owners, it does not strictly follow, that they are always granted: They may possibly be withheld and suspended from the Devout Supplicant out of Kindness, and somewhat that is better and more valuable conferred on him in their Room. And tho' it cannot be affirm'd, that the best external Comforts are certain Returns of Devotion, and immediately flow from it by a necessary positive Causality, yet is the Expectation thereof reasonable in it self, and highly favour'd by the Direction of our Saviour in the Text; who came not to extirpate, but to correct and govern our Appetites in this Particular. But then it were an Injury unpardonable, to suppose his Religion so low and mercenary, as to be made the Price of transitory Enjoyments: For Men to assemble only for Corn and Wine, for fair Harvests and full Vintages, savours altogether of a *Jewish* Spirit. This Passage of Christ then, respecting chiefly Things Spiritual, is not with equal Force

Force to be extended to Sublunary Favours: And when it is so apply'd to inferior Objects and Purposes, our Desires must have new and different Properties, and can never be thought regular and allowable before the Throne of Grace, but in Conjunction with these Two.

First, When they are temperate in their Meaning and Design, and do not exceed the Bounds of Modesty: No Man can fall under Censure for setting his Heart too much upon the Treasures of Eternity, or being too intent and solicitous in their Pursuit, in laying up a good Foundation against the Time to come: In this the Desire may be too lax, cool and indifferent, but hurtful Excess can have no Place here.

Whereas, in our Approaches to the Deity for Earthly Emoluments, we are stinted and confin'd, and never allow'd to go beyond the admirable Patterns that are set us by *Jacob* and *Agur*. And as the Sons of Piety and Obedience seldom enjoy less than what those shining Examples did pitch on, so are they never known with Impatience to thirst for more; for whatever is bestow'd, over and above convenient Supplies, is to be interpreted the mere Efflux of unlimited Bounty, and not to be claim'd by any, as matter of Promise. Tempting Extraordinaries, Splendor of Fortune, and Height of Place, may be and sometimes are flung in by Providence, but can never be the allow'd Subject of a Christian Petition; because they are not always Blessings: Few, very few Persons have Hearts to bear their Weight, and none upon Earth needs them.

Secondly,

Secondly, Our Desires of Temporal Favours are never lawful, but when they are made with an humble Deference to the All-wise Pleasure, and Appointment of the Donor. When the People of *Israel* desir'd a King, there was nothing sinful or extravagant in the thing it self, nay, on the contrary, there was a great deal of real Good in the Option; for Monarchy, the best Form of Government, and the least subject to Sedition, was intended for them, as a signal Favour by God himself. But they arriv'd to the dangerous Pitch of prescribing to Infinite Wisdom, saying, *Nay, but we will have a King to rule over us, and to fight our Battels, as the other Nations*: And they were not deny'd the Request of their Lips, they had a King in God's Anger, which put their Necks under a grievous Yoke. We Christians then are safe and innocent in asking, but can never without Guilt limit or prescribe, because God is the sole Judge of proper Seasons of bestowing his Favours; and consequently it will very ill become us to grow sullen and discontented, when cross'd in our lower Designs, when our Fields and Vineyards are not fully water'd, and do not thrive and prosper to our Minds. In all our Applications we are to stand entirely to His Disposals, and study to be as patient under Denials, as we are pleas'd under His largest Grants and Concessions, that we may appear, with the well-temper'd Apostle, *to be instructed in all Things, both how to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer Need*: In every Condition ardently desiring

ring to possess our God, and to be really possess'd of Him.

And because some complain of this, as a considerable piece of Hardship, that their Addresses are rejected, tho' presented in the Name, and by the Direction of Christ himself; that they desire continually, and yet have not: The External Neglect of Christian Votaries being thought a Reproach to Providence, and a standing Discredit to Religion; by way of Answer to this common Allegation, it will be proper to offer

The *Third* Head of Discourse, namely, That the Denial of our Temporal Petitions is no Disparagement to the Doctrine of the Text, but a Method altogether consistent with God's Honour and Goodness and highly beneficial to our selves.

And for the Vindication of this Procedure might be fairly alledg'd, That God is vested with an undoubted Right to deal with His Creatures as He pleases. But seeing the Almighty waves the Exercise of this Right, and never governs after an arbitrary Manner, with Rigor to be felt, and not examin'd or scann'd by His People, but with the impartial Equity of a Judge, nay, with the tenderest Compassion and Indulgence of a Father; so that even the meekest *Moses* disputed the Equality of His Ways in *Ægypt*, and humbly enquir'd into the Reasons of their tedious Bondage: His not granting our Addresses may be defended and clear'd from other Grounds and Topics. I will mention Three.

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First, This is highly consistent with the Divine Honour, because of its peculiar Aptness to preserve a due Veneration for it in the Hearts of Men. Did God oblige us in all the Particulars we pray'd for relating to this Life, were the Text fulfill'd in the very Letter, we should too probably employ our whole Time, our Care and Concern upon this Subject, and fill his House with Jarring and Counter-Petitions, and each Petitioner would aim to be gratify'd with his Darling Temporal Wish. For Instance, One Man would desire Riches and Honour, for the advancing of his Name and Family: Another would thirst after Liberty, boundless Liberty: And a Third Suppliant would strive to be cloath'd with Power, that should carry all before it, and lay whole Countries desolate: The Disciples themselves, when led by such a Spirit, were for calling for Fire from Heaven to consume their Adversaries: Nay, Temporal Accommodations ran so much in their Heads, that they became the prevailing Motive to their being list'd in the Service of Christ, as is evident from their own Proposal, made by *Peter* singly, but as the Mouth of all the rest, *Mat. 19. 27. Lo! we have forsaken all and follow'd thee, what shall we have therefore?* Men call'd from the Fishery or Sheepfold could not have much to leave; their All probably amounted to a few worn tatter'd Nets, and other Instruments of no value: And yet in Lieu thereof, in Exchange, they expected Posts of Honour

nour and Profit, nothing less than commencing Ministers of State to their new Master, which plainly shews what is the grand Petition, and lyes nearest to an Unregenerate Heart, and that too often Men suborn their Hopes to betray their Duty; such is the Witchcraft, so strong is the Bias of Earthly Objects, as tho' their Being determin'd with their Life.

To prevent therefore the unworthy Degradation of His Nature and Honour, and lest any should fasten on Him the scandalous Appellation of being *God of this World*, St. Paul's Character of the Devil; the Almighty is pleas'd frequently to Defeat our Expectations, the better to Divorce our Thoughts from perishing Vanities, to fix our Hearts, and terminate our Passions on Things above, or as our Church most fitly expresses in the Collect for this Day; *That he being our Ruler and Guide, we may so pass through things Temporal, that we finally lose not the things Eternal.* And our highest Wisdom must consist in forming to our selves such a Passage, that our Progress may end in the New *Jerusalem*, which is to be kept in our View continually, with Minds strongly bent upon it, but piously indifferent to all other Interests, the Way thither being narrow, hard to find, and subject to Impediments.

Secondly, The Denial of Temporal Wishes is no Disparagement to the Doctrine of the Text, because in a lapsed Condition Men are incompetent Judges of what is safe and beneficial to themselves. So great

was the intellectual Depravation of the Pagans of the politer Nations, as *Grotius* notes, even of the *Greeks* and *Romans*, that they were wont to ask evil and hurtful Things of their Gods, and even implor'd their Help for the Perpetration of Wickedness in their publick Temples. And the Scripture mentions the miserable and injudicious in this Respect, under a much better Light; when the *Israelites* in the Wilderness were not to be satisfy'd with *Manna*, the Bread of Heaven, but insisted with mutinous Impatience to be fed, as before in *Ægypt*, the Almighty judiciously fulfill'd their raving Expectations; Psal. 78. 27. *He rain'd Flesh upon them as thick as Dust, and feather'd Fowls as the Sands of the Sea: They did eat and were fill'd, he gave them their own Desire.* The Expression deserves special notice, *He gave them their own Desire*; but that brought on their immediate Ruin, *For while the Meat was yet in their Mouths the heavy Wrath of God came upon them, and slew the wealthiest of them, and smote down the chosen Men that were in Israel.* And if such as liv'd under the immediate Conduct of Providence, and tasted of its miraculous Effects, were thus fatally mistaken in their Choice, and utterly perish'd under the weight of their own perverse Wishes; there can be no Security in our Case against Error and Deceit, that the Understanding shall not be cheated and abused, to the asking of Stones for Bread, and Serpents instead of Fish. For God, then,

to gratifie fallen Man in every Particular, would be to please him to his utter Ruin; which not only vindicates His Justice in frequent Refusals, but loudly proclaims the seasonable Mercy of interposing between us, and our hurtful inexpedient Petitions, and of His sending often the valuable and important, tho' to Flesh and Blood ungrateful, Blessing of Disappointment.

Thirdly, This Method is strictly agreeable to the Divine Wisdom and Goodness, inasmuch as it strongly engages the common Dependance, the Thankfulness and Obedience of Mankind, and carries in it a Tendency to make us tame, tractable and obsequious. If God rejected no Petition, but without any Discrimination received all, His Favours and Blessings would not long continue under that Name, but be interpreted the strict Dues of the Receivers rather than the bountiful Emanations of the Goodness of the Giver, even the necessary Effects of their own Personal Merits and Services. Praise and Thanksgiving could never be kept alive in common Practice, which ever was the more neglected Part of Devotion; for, but One of the Ten that had been made whole by our Saviour, returned to praise Him in the Temple. Besides, constant Acceptance and Success would too probably betray the Petitioners into ill Managery, disobediently to rant and swagger like a young dissolute Heir, when the Estate is settled, and by the sorrowful Parent not to be disentail'd.

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Whereas, now that God hides himself from our Supplications, and is frequently not to be intreated by His Servants, we are thereby taught to live more humble and dutiful, and less quarrellous with Providence; every Denial is a happy Exercise of our Virtue; and there is no way more likely to secure and fix the Service of importunate Favourites, than sometimes missing to speed in their Requests, and being now and then accusom'd to Repulses. This Consideration inclin'd *Diogenes* the Philosopher to pray before a Statue, for tho' he could not expect any Relief or profitable Answer from it, yet such an Application wonted him to Denials, and made him better able to brook Delays and grating Disappointments from others, equally deaf and inexorable it seems with the Statue. And did not the great Governor of the World think fit to reject our improper Petitions, were not this wise Dispensation a standing Part of His Moral and Providential Government, it may reasonably be conjectur'd, that greater Numbers would fall Martyrs to Vice, and die of the Plague of inordinate Desire in one Day, than are master'd by all the Diseases incident to Nature in a whole Year: So far is this Method from being a Disparagement to the Doctrine in the Text, or any way impugning the genuin Design of it, that the Felicity of Mankind is evidently promoted by it. Restraints are proper even for humble and modest Tempers, but absolutely necessary for the assuming, forward,

forward, and conceited, (and too many among the Faithful are thus moulded) who must be kept under exact Discipline, low and depending, and often dismiss'd without a Blessing. The Instance of the Sons of *Zebedee* undeniably proves the Rejection of the bold and arrogant, and that of the Penitent on the Cross exhibits the Condescensions of Mercy to the judicious and modest Votary, who, beyond his Hopes, and Compass of his dying Petition, was instantly receiv'd into Paradise.

If then we acknowledge the Revelation of Christ to be the unalterable Measure of our Belief, we cannot at the same time but with Ingenuity own also, that in the Subject before us our Faith is built upon the strongest Foundation, even the Veracity of His Promise, who indited the Text as a Guard against the common *Jewish* Objection, that their Devotions were vain in the Event, and turn'd to no Account. And tho' the extraordinary Efficacy of it bestow'd on the Apostles cannot with any Right or Truth be claimed by us, yet the common standing Importance is Encouragement sufficient to put us upon holy Action, and to carry us through with it: This Passage breaths fresh Life into our Endeavours every Morning, and must carry Unction in it to all Ages, even 'till *Shiloh* come: This causes the Preachers of Christianity to prostrate themselves with pious Assurance, with Hope at least, between the Porch and the Altar, that their Intercessions shall be accepted
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for themselves, and their respective People: This prevails with the Hearers to sit at the Feet of their crucify'd Lord continually, learning His Truths, and seeking His Aids in the solemn Assemblies; and strongly intimates to both, That He will vouchsafe His Presence with them, pour of His precious Blood daily upon their Offerings, and be in the very midst of them, to pardon and remit by His Goodness what their Weakness cannot perform. In the Infancy of the Church, and before the Conversion of the Empire to the Faith, great was the Force of this single Truth: Inspir'd with it, the whole Body of Christians, every common Believer being then a Confessor, met in obscure Places, *in the upper Rooms of the Houses of Believers*, when forcibly driven out of the Temple and Synagogue, who continu'd their Assemblies amidst the hottest Flames of Persecution, when for ought they knew the next Prayer they were to make was to be in a Dungeon, or in the Den of Lions. The first Planting of the Gospel was greatly owing to their Zeal and Constancy in Holy Duties, for as it bore down the Prejudice of private Men, so it prov'd stronger than the Violence that was daily us'd by Princes; who delighted in poor Triumphs, in those Triumphs which were indelible Stains to the Royal Character, and exactly resembled that of the King of *Babylon*, who commanded his Guards to seize the Three innocent and religious *Hebrews*, and cast them into the midst of a burning fiery Furnace.

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If then the first Christians, notwithstanding the highest Dangers and Severities; incessantly paid this common Tribute to their Saviour, if their Devotions were the Language of one Heart and of one Soul, and their Congregations so many affecting Models of Heaven it self; ought not this much more to be the constant Practice in a quiet Hour, and in a peaceable Condition of the Church? Is it not a disingenuous Return to God, to neglect His Worship under the greatest Affluence of Blessings and Mercies? Blessings, which some Foreign Churches of the Reformation have utterly lost, and others this Day enjoy with a trembling Hand: And the most probable Method of securing their Continuance to this Nation, and barring out Idolatry and Superstition, is, for all to conspire in the same End, to make Piety root well, spread and fructifie. It can be no other than a crying Iniquity, a criminal Reflection on the Laws, as a *Lesbian* Rule, and all Tongues must be struck dumb upon the Contemplation of it, that Persons should dare to live without Regard to any Religious Society whatsoever, and be found to Pray no where; absurdly calling themselves Christians for no other Reason, but because they eat, and drink, and sleep, as other Beasts do, in a Christian Kingdom.

But for Truth sake it must be observ'd, that this undivided Corner of the Church of Christ, this Noble Country, happily affords Devout Communicants,

that

that bear some good Proportion to the Number of Inhabitants. And may God add to the Church daily such as shall be sav'd! Even such as shall not only be Partakers of the Means of Grace resting in them, but credit our Communion by a judicious Piety, and the real Power of Religion! *For the Father seeketh such to worship him.* The *Jews*, we see, from this Chapter, frequented the House of God, but, alas! it was more with their Bodies than Souls, out of Custom and Formality, rather than Conscience: They brought Sacrifices to it, which were not fit for an Idol Temple, and therefore were they scourged out of it even by Him, who was the greatest Pattern of Meekness and Forbearance that ever liv'd, who could endure any thing but the Contempt of it. And this very fully suggests to us, that neither can the Walls of a Christian Church by any means hallow or sanctifie careless Worshipers: No, we must receive the Truth in the Love of it, that we may be sav'd; nor can any thing but an uniform Piety, both of Heart and Life, entitle us to the Promise in the Text in its utmost Latitude: A Promise, which is to be understood with a special Reservation to the Wisdom and Oeconomy of the Maker, and therefore cannot be said to violate it, or break His Word, tho' He does not step out of His Course to oblige all Suppliants; *Who filleth the hungry with good things, but the rich he sends empty away:* That they may not presume upon his Goodness, and mispend their Talents, in

Confidence of fresh and larger Supplies from Him, whose Gifts and Graces are always free, but wisely dispens'd and seasonably given.

Whoever then, upon the whole, understands himself, the Design of the Christian Religion, and of this particular Precept of it, will address the Throne of Grace, for things Spiritual, with a vigorous Faith and ardent Importunity, whose Success shall be as certain and infallible as essential Truth can make it; especially when he acts in a pious Concert with his Neighbours and Fellow-Christians, who may be better prepar'd to ask, and therefore more likely to obtain: And since the *Ægyptian* was visibly bless'd by God for *Joseph's* sake, his modest Hope is to have his own meaner Offering accepted in Company with theirs, and to fare the better, because of his Brethren and daily Companions in Worship. For tho' God is not strictly ty'd to Numbers, or Places, yet his understanding Servant considers, that Divine Graces are more certainly entail'd upon His House and publick Family. And in his Approaches to the Deity for Temporal Favours, the Temple is never prophan'd by undue intemperate Desires, never turn'd into an House of Merchandise by raving and covetous Expectations; for his Wishes are entirely submitted to the unerring Wisdom and Direction of Providence: Stations of Profit are neither eagerly sought by him, nor declin'd as Instruments and Capacities of doing good; his first and
most

most early Care is, *To seek the Kingdom of God and his Righteousness*, being stedfastly persuaded, and so taught by his Saviour, *That these lower things shall be added unto him*; and probably the more added, when they are least minded or ask'd, as it was in Fact, when they were wholly waved in the Option of *Solomon*. And should they be with-held from him, his Comfort is to be Master of much better Possessions, and never to miscarry in his main Design; for he has but one Way to go, even the direct plain Way of his Duty, in which he persists, moving with inviolable Integrity, be it never so ill pav'd, never so rugged and uneasy. And since this present World, in its Frame and Constitution, is a mere Scene of Contingencies, Want, and unsatisfy'd Desires, where the Pleasure of Enjoyment is ever neglected to follow a new Train and Succession of imperious Appetites, he innocently Prides himself in standing related to another which is to come, where the great and wise People possess all that they can desire, and still desire the very Things they possess; so that avoiding the Distraction of Variety, as an Heir of Immortal Hopes, *One thing*, with Holy David, *he desires of God*, and what good Man will not earnestly desire it? *That he may dwell in his House all the Days of his Life, and visit his Temple*; from whence, after a Life devoutly and usefully spent in all the Acts of spiritual Communion, in Prayers, Hymns

Hymns of Praise, and Sacraments, his Passage may prove safe, his Conveyance easie, through the Merits of Christ, into the World of consummate Bliss, and undisturbed Enjoyment. In which, God, of his Infinite Mercy, grant us all an happy Meeting and inseparable Abode, that we may be for ever with the Lord. *Amen.*



F I N I S.
